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AUTHOR Vasconcelos, Teresa
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ABSTRACT

Using as a starting point the painting "Las Meninas" by Velasquez, which depicts the painter within his painting, this paper discusses the interpretive paradigm in research and, within it, the value of metaphor as a research tool. Example situations from an ethnographic study of a master teacher and her kindergarten in Lisbon are used to describe the value of this approach. The paper claims that Velasquez's painting provides a powerful image to describe what interpretive research is all about: The painter is inside the painting--as he paints others, he is painting himself. In other words, in the interpretive paradigm, the researcher is inside the research situation and cannot be an outsider. The paper maintains that metaphor can be used within research as a sophisticated conceptual structure, as the imaginative rationality which illuminates the experience, and as a way of creating new gestalts. It is noted that during the study of the master teacher, the metaphor of the "Large Table" emerged, much like King Arthur's Round Table, as the center of power and community-building in the classroom. This metaphor provided coherence and descriptive strength to the study's naturalistic observations. The paper includes a model of interpretive research procedures and theoretical background. (Contains 51 references.) (EV)

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The Power of Metaphor in Qualitative Research: Building Community in a Kindergarten around the Large Table

by
Teresa Vasconcelos,
Director
Department for Basic Education
Portugal

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> Lives as opposed to problems may puzzle the fixed notions of theorists... To approach lives, not to pin them down, not to confine them with labels, and not to limit them with heavily intellectualized speculations, but again, to approach, to describe, to transmit as directly and sensibly as possible what has been seen, heard, grasped, felt by an observer who is also being constantly being observed himself--not only by himself but by others, who watch and doubt and fear and resent him, and also, yes, show him kindness and generosity and tenderness and affection. The aim, once again, is to approach, then describe what there is that seems to matter. (Robert Coles, 1971, p. 25-41)

1. Introduction

When, in the year of 1972, I was doing post-graduate studies in Madrid, I would often visit the Prado Museum. After wandering in the galleries I would end the visit stopping at the Velasquez painting "Las Meniñas", in a sort of obsession. I always was puzzled by what the painter--Velasquez himself--was doing in the painting, at the left side end. Why did Velasquez paint himself in a scene where he tried to describe the Princess--la Infanta--and her maids? Shouldn't he be outside , since he was the painter and he was not doing a self-portrait?

From the starting point of "Las Meniñas" I will try, in this work, to present a reflection about the interpretive paradigm in research, and within it, about the value of metaphor as a research tool. Exemplary situations will be presented from an ethnographic study I developed in a kindergarten in Lisbon (Vasconcelos, 1995).

The value of the metaphor, as a sophisticated conceptual structure, as the imaginative rationality which illuminates the experience, and as a way of creating new gestalts, will be highlighted.

When I think about the basic axioms of interpretive research I can't stop thinking that Velazquez inside his painting is a powerful image to describe what interpretive research is about. The painter is inside the painting: as he paints others, he is painting himself. It means that in the interpretive paradigm, the researcher is inside the research situation. She (he) can't be an outsider.

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According to the interpretive research paradigm, there is not an external reality to be researched by a supposedly objective researcher. Realities are socially constructed, they are multiple. Therefore, there is no way that the researcher can be an outsider to the study. She has to be inside the study as Velazquez is inside his painting. As she researches other people's lives, the researcher is herself in the study, she is researching herself, too. As Harding (1987) says:

> The best feminist analysis goes beyond these innovations in subject matter in a crucial way; it insists that the inquirer her/himself be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter, thereby recovering the entire research process for scrutiny in the results of research. That is, the class, race, culture, and gender assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors of the researcher her/himself must be placed within the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint. . . . Thus the researcher appears to us not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests. (p. 9)

In the process of developing an ethnography about Ana, a preschool teacher in her kindergarten at Figueirinha[1] , which was developed throughout sixteen months of naturalistic, participant (Spradley, 1980) observations, guided by an interpretive interactionist (Denzin, 1989) perspective, I was aware that Ana was not the "object" of my study, but she was the "subject" of the study. But I was a "subject", too, since I was part of the research framework.

A powerful metaphor describing Ana´s work with the children around a large table which was in the center of the classroom emerged from the naturalistic observations. As I studied Ana and her professional life around the "Large Table", I tried to develop a research process which would affirm complexity and interdisciplinarity. I attempted to describe until exhaustion, with detail, realism and empathy her activity and the life of children and families under her responsibility. Yet I assumed that I, as the researcher, as a painter recreating a piece of life which I was observing, I couldn't be out of the painting. It was through my eyes that that painting was being created.

Therefore it was after 22 years of my wandering at the galleries of Prado Museum, that I understood the attraction I felt for "Las Meniñas" and the genius of Velasquez in his extraordinary intuition (that only artists are capable of...). Velasquez helped me to clarify my role as a qualitative woman researcher.

2. An interpretive way of looking at reality

I think my approach to reality has been always interpretive. Therefore, I assume that reality is socially constructed, therefore there are multiple realities to consider. The researcher is an insider to the study, actually, she is the instrument of the study. This is the reason why I will be using the first person, "I," throughout this study. Trying to be coherent with this "I", I will be writing also in the feminine genre.

Since I wanted to study the life and work of an early childhood professional, it was clear for me that the best way to study Ana as a teacher was through the interpretive paradigm. Yet I was acutely aware that if it would be another researcher, even another woman researcher developing this same study, the study would be necessarily different. Therefore it is my vision of Ana that became the result of this study.

Research in the interpretive paradigm happens in the natural setting, it is descriptive and concerned with the meaning and emergent issues (emic). As a teacher interested in researching another teacher, the interpretive paradigm appeared to respond to my concern

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[1] For the purposes of this research, the names of the participants and places of this study were changed. Ana is a long time member of the well-known in Portugal, Modern School Movement.

with issues of human meaning in the classroom. I see classrooms as "socially and culturally organized environments" (Erickson, 1986, p. 120). Walsh, Tobin and Graue (1993) consider that interpretive researchers should systematically use "the same sensibilities and sensitivities that make for good teachers, friends, lovers, parents, and people--listening, conversing, interpreting, reflecting, describing, and narrating" (p. 465). With Ana, I tried to listen, to converse, to interpret, to reflect, to describe and, finally, to narrate.

Interaction is a key to teaching. Human interaction is, for me, a key to research. Denzin (1989) considers that there are interactions that give primary meaning to a person's life. They may be "problematic interactions" (Denzin, 1989) and they change how a person defines herself and her relations with others.

As I've matured, I have learned to approach reality in a way that is not about "either/or", but a very complex interplay where human beings try to construct sense and meaning for their lives. I have learned that we cannot so much judge, but rather try to understand, in the sense of trying to grasp the meaning, learning to see beyond the first layers of impressions, which are necessarily superficial. I could recall here important "epiphanies" (Denzin, 1989) in my life which have definitely determined my approach to research. This is the reason why I situate myself in an "interpretive interactionist" (Denzin 1989) perspective, meaning that I want to confer meaning to the problematic symbolic interaction.

I tried to bring my feelings and my personal history into my research, despite my "feelings of vulnerability" (Krieger, 1991), because I was aware that this was the only way I could be authentic as a researcher. I discovered that, in some sort, my anger was part of my subjectivity because of the way early childhood teachers are treated in research, not as subjects but as objects.

As Wolcott (1990) I chose "subjectivity as a strength and as a potential of qualitative approaches instead of trying to achieve a detached objectivity which I don't know if I wanted or need" (p. 131)

3. Research procedures

The research procedures in their multiple interactive dimensions are shown in Figure 1. I ask the reader to imagine a multitude of arrows connecting all the areas of the picture. Drawing all these arrows was graphically impossible.

These multiple arrows should connect, not only the different people involved in this research, the places where we met; the time, the events which have drawn us together; the different roles that, as a researcher, I assumed throughout the process; the ways with which I collected information, the ways I recorded it; but also the mode, the affective tone of this entire process.

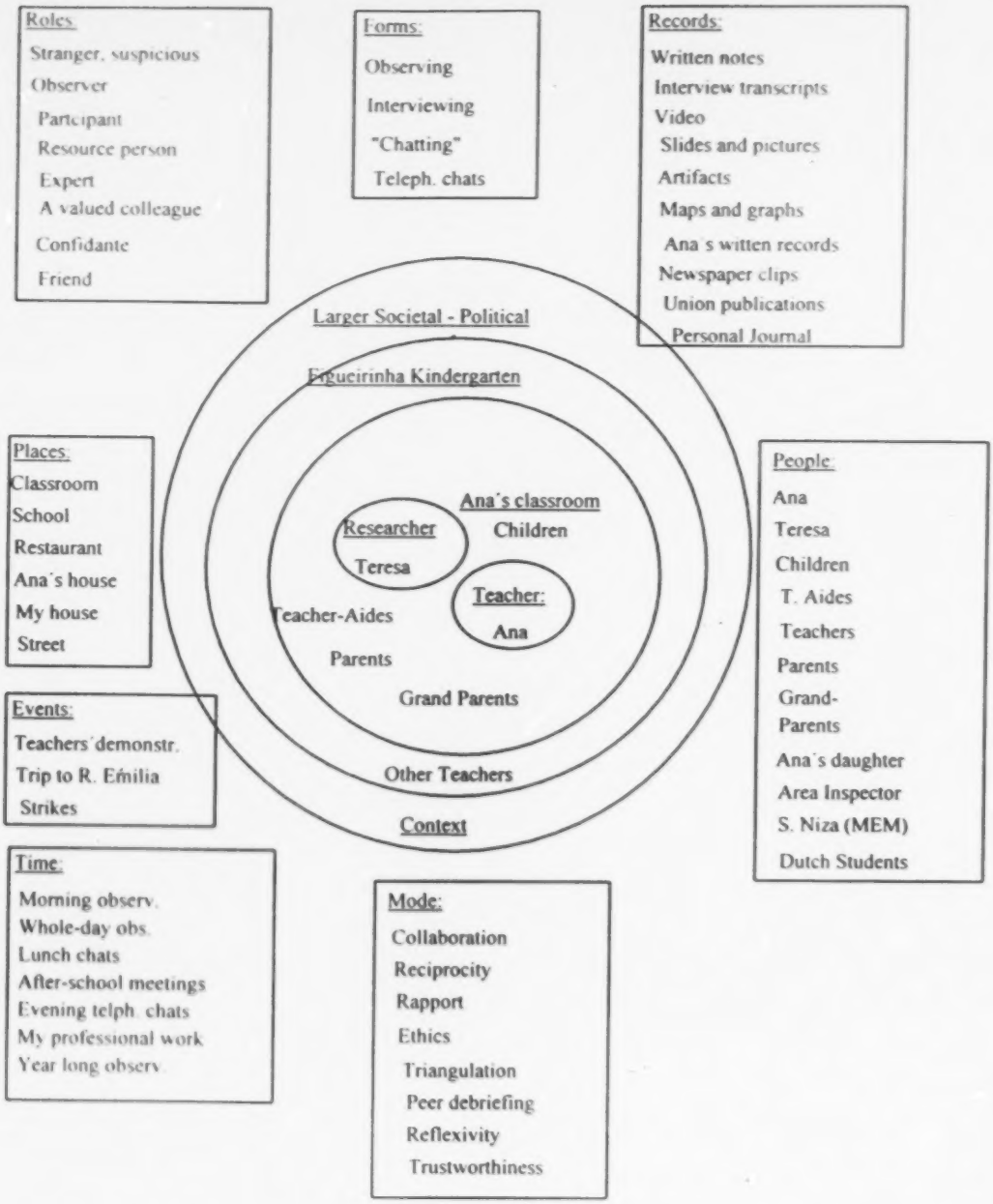

Figure 1. Research procedures and their interactive dimensions.

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Interaction is a key to teaching. For me, human interaction is key to research. Denzin (1989) considers that there are interactions that give primary meaning to a person's life. They can be "problematic interactions" (Denzin, 1989) and they change the person defines herself and the relations with others. The "interpretive interactionist" perspective is "an attempt to make the world of problematic lived experience of ordinary people directly available to the reader" (p. 7). According to Denzin the interpretive interactionist perspective is existential, interactive and biographic; naturalistic; based on sophisticated rigor; it can be pure or applied; it is postpositivist and is based on feminist criticism to positivism; it is concerned with the social construction of gender, power, knowledge, history and emotion.

The Large Table, the powerful emerging metaphor, was also an image of the research I attempted to develop: participatory, democratic, interactive, co-constructed. Deeply rooted in a process of "intersubjectivities" (Rogoff, 1990), it assumed a "processual subjectivity", in a "participatory mode of consciousness" (Heshuius, 1994)

The main questions that guided the study were the following:

- What is the commitment and competence that distinguishes Ana as a Master Teacher (exhaustive description)?
- What are the main "epiphanies" (Denzin, 1989), the turning points that have shaped her life as a person and as a teacher?
- How has Ana´s practice been shaped and influenced by her personal and professional biography?
- How does a Master Teacher perceives being a Master Teacher?

4. Theoretical landscape

Far beyond the paradigm, well known in the eighties, of "process-product" research, where teachers would implement the decisions of researchers, I felt closer of the "classroom ecology paradigm" (Shulman, 1986), because of the complex interactive dynamics of the classroom and the importance of studying teachers with the voices of teachers themselves (Goodson, 1992), from the inside. I attempted to work engaged in what the language of cultural anthropology calls a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). Denzin (1989) considers that a "thick description":

> goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard. (p. 83)

Clifford (1988) understands ethnography as a "constructive negotiation involving two, and usually more, conscious, politically significant subjects" (p. 41), and as a "cultural critique" (Marcus & Fisher, 1986). Wertsch (1989), calling for researchers to conduct ethnographic analyses of cultural and institutional settings, insists that this research will be essential for "understanding the ways in which institutional and cultural forces shape individuals and how individuals might come to control and shape these forces, thereby developing the capacity for emancipating themselves from unwanted effects" (p. 29)

Clifford (1988) describes ethnographies as composed of discourses and that "its different components are dialogically related" (p. 44), therefore being "complex multivocal processes" (p.44). Clifford invites us to transcend the mere dialogical to arrive at the "polyphonic." This process leads the ethnographer to reposition herself as she tries to understand what she is studying.

Several works were developed studying the practice of excellent teachers (Schon, 1983; Elbaz, 1983; Clandinin, 1985, Yonemura, 1986; Ayers, 1989). Yet I wanted to develop a truth collaborative endeavor, according to my interpretive feminine perspective. Feminists contribution for this kind of research has been very important by valuing interaction, being concerned with the ethics of research, recognizing informality, yet being deeply attentive to the subject(s) of the research, affirming and recognizing subjectivity as part of the research process (Harding, 1987; Reinharz, 1992:Belenky, Clinchy, Goldenberger & Tarule, 1986). I recognize teaching as a feminized profession (Weiler, 1988, 1994; Freeman, 1990; Grumet, 1988). I attempted, as Carter says "to dignify women's work stories" so that "we don't minimize what they do" (1993, p.11). I called my work a research in the feminine genre.

As a background landscape I affirmed social constructivism and the works by Vygotsky (1986), Bruner (1986, 1990, 1996), Rogoff (1989), Wertsch (1989), Donaldson (1976), Bruffee (1986). According to Bruffee:

> A social constructivist position in any discipline assumes that entities we normally call reality, knowledge, facts, texts, selves and do son, are constructs generated by communities of like-minded peers. Social construction understands reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves and so on as community-generated and community-maintained linguistic entities -- or, more broadly speaking, symbolic entities -- that define or "constitute" the communities that generate them (p. 774).

As Erickson, I would say:

> In substance, my work is an attempt to combine close analysis of fine details of behavior and meaning in everyday social interaction with analysis of the wider societal context -- the field of broader social influences -- within which the face to face interactions take place, In method, my work is an attempt to be empirical without being positivist; to be rigorous and systematic in investigating the slippery phenomena of everyday interaction and its connections, through the medium of subjective meaning, with the wider social world (1986, p. 120).

Bruner (1986) synthesizes in a very clear way his vision about social constructivism:

> How to create in the young an appreciation of the fact that many worlds are possible, that meaning and reality are created and not discovered, that negotiation is the art of constructing new meanings by which individuals can regulate their relations with each other (p. 149).

5. The power of metaphor

My obsession with Velasquez' "Las Meniñas" led me to reflect upon the power of metaphor in the field of educational research, namely in the interpretive paradigm. Several metaphors came up in my study. The "Large Table" one is just an example. Others will be explained later.

According to Oldfather and West (1994)

> the metaphor invites exploration of both the deep structures that guide qualitative research and the improvisatory qualities that allow ethnographers to fly free in response to serendipitous events and emerging understandings (p. 23).

Oldfather and West quote former studies by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) calling forth attention into the illuminative power of metaphor:

> There is a similarity induced by the metaphor that goes beyond the mere similarities between the two ranges of experience. The additional similarity is a *structural* similarity. It involves the way we understand how the individual highlighted experiences fit together in a coherent way. . . The metaphor, by virtue of giving coherent structure to a range of our experiences, *creates similarities of a new kind* (pp. 150-151).

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) metaphor is not just a language structure, it is a **conceptual structure**:

> [Metaphor] permits an understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another, creating coherences by virtue of imposing gestalts that are structured by natural dimensions of experience. . . . Metaphor is not merely a matter of language. It is a matter of conceptual structure. And conceptual structure[2] is not merely a matter of the intellect - it involves all the natural dimensions of our experience, including aspects of our sense experiences: color, shape, texture, sound, etc. . . . Works of art provide new experiential gestalts and, therefore, new coherences (p. 235).

This new "gestalt" led me to understand why "Las Meniñas" painting had helped to organize and syntethize my experiences as an interpretive researcher. I would say that my tendency towards using metaphors is a strength, a way of creating conceptual structures, of going deeper into the interpretive process, of finding its coherence.

Oldfather and West also clarify the interactions between intellect and intuition, cognition and affect, in the constructive process of creating a metaphor in its "aesthetical resonance with the sensorial experience", in a sense of allowing "new and deeper dimensions" in the analysis of experience:

> Structural similarities made clear through metaphor represent not only intellect but also the full range of human sensory experience. The power of metaphor derives in part from its aesthetic resonance with sensory experience -- from what Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 235) described as "imaginative rationality", or the blending of cognition and affect. . . . Metaphor can serve as a bridge from experience to mediation, representation and symbolism, which in turn allow us to understand experience in new and deeper ways. (p. 23)

5.1. The metaphor of the Large Table

In the study I conducted, the powerful metaphor of a Large Table started progressively emerging and became obvious. Despite of the fact of it being rectangular I recalled Artur and his knights around the Round Table because of its centrality (physical and symbolic) in the life of the preschool classroom I was observing. The Large Table was a power center. The group's life was fed by the discussions, negotiations (Bruner, 1986) around the Large Table. The Table was the place of the first meeting in the morning, the space for planning, for giving news, to discuss delicate issues of the classroom life, is the forum to take care of the unexpected ("Let's sit around the Large

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[2] According to Oldfather and West "deep structures" are taken in Chomsky's (1972) terms, as "abstract principles embedded in thought. Although Chomsky's deep structures determine how speakers use and interpret language, the deep structures explored in this article determine how research is conducted. Deep structures make possible the social construction of meaning and expression.

Table..."), the place to put messages, things to remember. The center of the Table had many objects: a camera to register unexpected events, paper and pencil to take notes, the missing piece of a table game, the message to take later to grandfather...

The collective memory of the group was fed with conversations around the Large Table: "the former kindergarten that was on fire had a lemon tree... but you were not yet there"; several picture albums were used to register relevant facts of the group's life; Ana would write children's observations and sayings and use them later.

The metaphor of the Large Table served later, in the interpretation phase of my study to organize the three components of Ana´s teaching self: the "moral self" as the center of teaching; daily classroom life as an ever changing "puzzle"; community and democracy feeding the group´s memory.

A musical metaphor, taken from Fernandez (1986) is used to describe the quality of the group´s life around the Large Table: an "orchestral performance":

> each in their domain following the basic melody, but each adding the complementary qualities of their domain of expression. No instrument and no domain can "make music" alone, but performing together can create a vital or revitalized cosmological harmony out of interaction, replication, and wide classification (p. 178).

5.2. Ana and her metaphors

In the interviews, Ana used very often metaphors so that she could better express her thinking about her work. She says: "For me my work is like **a second home**", referring to the importance of the work environment, so that she could "feel well" and, therefore, "passing that feeling into the children". She also explains the quotidian in the classroom as **a puzzle**: "the pieces have to fit together so that we can make ourselves understood, and that puzzle has to be done day after day". Therefore I called Ana "a Master of the Quotidian". Her mastery would show in her capacity to transform the quotidian into socially and intellectually stimulant tasks for herself and the children. Ana also speaks about the way she nurtures the memory of the group as **"like treasuring"**. A treasure is something that is valued, appreciated, with a certain aura of mystery. Therefore it needs to be treated with respect and care. Many examples show how Ana "treasures" group´s life: sustaining activity, reconsctruturing experiences, recording, helping children to "entertain a problem in their own minds" (Dewey), helping to remember, emphasizing rituals.

I myself was living that "metaphoric dynamics" as I would move from the process of observing Ana insistently feeding the memory of the group after the fire that partially had destroyed the kindergarten, and the feeling that in a larger context Portuguese preschool education was under "crossed fire" because of recent governmental policies.

5.3. The interpretive power of a dream.

The culmination of this metaphorical process came up when, already in the process of writing the study, I had a disturbing dream which I considered epiphanic (Denzin, 1989)[4] and which gave me the key for the final interpretation of the study. As I woke up, I wrote it almost in a fever. I was disturbed because, despite the richness of the context, Ana was absent in the dream.

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4 Epiphany means, in Bruner´s terms (1989) a "moment of problematic experience that illuminates personal character, and often signifies a turning point in a person´s life" (p.141). In this case, I consider the dream "epiphanic" because it revealed something in the study, it became a very important turning point.

I dream that Huguinho is living with his grand father, who, in the dream, is Sr. Paixão. They have an apartment in an old, run-down building. Sr. Paixão manages to find an empty space by the back of the staircase where he builds a room for Huguinho. He paints the walls with white paint and then he hangs Huguinho´s art work done at school on the walls. Sr. Paixão is skilled in plastering--plastering is an old Portuguese craft and very few people are still able to do it--He frames and makes Hugo´s art work longer using exquisite plastering, like waves, painted in very soft blue, gray, purple colors, a little bit art deco style. The space looks like an art gallery and it is so full of joy and light!
Then, we move into a sort of party and Huguinho´s father, who is never in touch with his son, enters. The father is extremely moved by his son´s art work and I can see, in the dream, his astonished and puzzled face, as he is becoming aware of what his son is capable of doing.
I go to him and I say: "You should see him doing the calendar at Figueirinha. He always helps Ana preparing next month´s calendar. He is so good with numbers...."
And I see this huge, tall, black man, moved and touched by the real person his son has become. His eyes are in wonder and filled with tears. I see this man becoming interested in his son as a person. I see this man overcome with respect.
Curiously, Ana is absent in the dream. (Personal journal, July 31, 1994)

This dream was taken as a final powerful metaphor, the key for the interpretive process, the converging center for hundreds of pages of fieldnotes and reflections. This metaphor became the "deep conceptual structure" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), a way of understanding experience "with new and deeper dimensions" (Oldfather and West, 1994).

Ana´s absence in the dream represents the centrality of her presence -- the story in the dream represents her work --, but also the supreme art of any educator, defined by Donaldson (1979): "to render oneself unnecessary". Ana was deeply present in her dream because the whole dynamics of Huguinho´s room was a product of her work. Only the power of her educational practice would be able to transform the back of a staircase into an art gallery. Yet Ana is absent in the dream because she was no longer necessary. The structure, the "scaffold" (Wood, Bruner & Ross,1976)[5] was put into place and could be taken down because the building was ready and didn´t need it anymore.

6. Conclusion

As I come to the conclusion of this work I think about another role of the metaphor which is it´s playfulness role. It comes to my mind the image of a toy--which is at the same time a work of art--a kaleidoscope. As the observer changes slightly the position of the kaleidoscope, the reality--or what is being seen in that precise moment--changes in the multiplicity of the mirrors´ angles. As a researcher, and as a simple human being, the recognition of the complexities of today´s world raises interesting questions. It challenges me to assume a new attitude as a person, as a teacher trainer (now as an administrator), as a researcher, in which I try to understand the people I work with from their point of view... without forgetting my own point of view... I am aware that reality is socially constructed, it is negotiated. We are part of multiple realities. We are the kaleidoscope.

"It is all a question of respect" tells me Ana in an interview. This is her lesson for Teresa, the researcher, a simple lesson but so difficult to put into practice: an intricate puzzle, a complex work around the Large Table.

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5 According to Wood, Bruner & Ross (1976) "scaffolding" means "the adult tutorial interventions (which) should be inversely related to the child´s level of task competence -- so, for example, the more difficulty a child had in achieving a goal, the more direct the interventions should be (p. 284)".

I may say that multiple realities are not just constituted by this multiplicity of perspectives but also by what I call the diversity within ourselves. This internal diversity can come up in terms of contradictions and ambivalence as researcher and subject interact with each other. Contradictions and ambivalence bring a very human dimension into the research process.

The implicit metaphor in Velasquez' painting, where the painter is in the painting, applies to the interpretive study: the researcher is part of the research process, being inside it in a deep dialogue with her own subjectivity. The painter -- and the researcher -- are part of a kaleidoscope of multiple realities. It is from the dynamic interaction between Ana and me that came up the model of Ana's practice. It came up from a dialogic and negotiated process (Freire, 1975; Bruner, 1986; Burbules, 1993; Heshuius, 1994) where theory arises from a practice that is situated, determined in and by time, rooted in the process of intersubjectivities (Rogoff, 1990).

I invite you to play with the kaleidoscope again. But let's use it as a metaphor for the beauty and complexity of human mind and human interaction:

> The human mind evolves as a kaleidoscope and, as it turns, all its multiple facets reflect and respond to the circular circumstances in mutation. Once each facet speaks to the central axis, the central personality, everyone and each of the responses are legitimate, integrated and truth
>
> *Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Essays on Artist.*

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